

Opera's Farthest Frontier. A History of Professional Opera in New Zealand. By Adrienne Simpson. Reed, Auckland, 1996. 288 pp. NZ price: \$44.95. ISBN 0-7900-0511-5.

'AN EXOTICK and irrational entertainment' was Dr Johnson's infamous description of opera. For opera in New Zealand another of his dicta might be revised: sometimes it is done very well, but you may be surprised to find it done at all.

Ever since the genre was invented, it has strained human potential, not only in terms of the ability to sing and to act, but in terms of the ability to manage and resource. The mixture has made for a history full of tensions; of catastrophes and triumphs; of greatness and pettiness; of idealism and make-do. Prima donnas have unfairly borne the burden. Often the drama is off-stage.

The genre was nurtured by rulers and sustained by taxpayers. If they were not supportive, opera had to resort to the box-office, and the public might be no less whimsical than the princes, perhaps even more difficult to flatter, more doubtful about providing continuous support. Contemporary opera must still rely on the state or other sponsors and on the public. It must still make compromises, partly dictated by financial circumstances and partly by other factors, such as the challenge of other forms of entertainment.

Adrienne Simpson's *Opera's Farthest Frontier* — paralleling the work of Alison Gyger across the Tasman — puts particular emphasis on the companies that toured New Zealand in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her earlier writings have already shown that they are a rich topic.

The immediate reaction of an opera-goer is to exclaim at the diversity of their repertoire. The Lyster company of 1864-5, going first to golden Dunedin, presented 26 operas in its season. They included recent works of Verdi, *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, *Il Trovatore*, and also Meyerbeer's spectacular and demanding *Les Huguenots*, known, by its requirements, as the night of the seven stars. The audience was clearly more prepared for novelty than we are today, less distracted, perhaps, by other entertainments. The diversity of the repertoire also reflected the small size of the population: the limited number of opera-goers had to go to the opera several times. Compromises were made in scenery, chorus and orchestra, and clearly there was, as in opera in general for much of this time, little 'production'. The singers, too, had to sing more often than was good for them. But, while standards might also be damaged by cuts or interpolations, the warmth and the excitement of the seasons seem enviable, and Simpson effectively evokes them. Opera, however exotick or irrational, was domesticated in colonial New Zealand, in particular in an Italian dimension, as indeed in the home country.

The companies were, however, mainly based in Australia, for the most part treating the Australasian colonies as one market. There are echoes of that today, too, with the exchange of productions and personnel. But the New Zealand segment was particularly challenging. The population was sparse and dispersed, and the transport costs were high. Nor could audiences be relied upon, again a comment to be echoed today. No one could explain why Aucklanders only half-filled the new Theatre Royal for the Simonsens in 1876.

The boldest impresario was George Musgrove, who premièred *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser* in 1901. Attendances were phenomenal; but, as a contemporary put it, 'expenditure is said to exceed the receipts from even the largest houses'. The 1907 tour indeed broke Musgrove's spirit. The caution of his former partner, J.C. Williamson, prevailed. The nature of the compromises shifted: standards would improve, but the repertoire would become less copious, less adventurous. Tours, too, became more infrequent, and there was competition from musical comedy, and above all from the cinema.

The intervention of the state came late in the story, and it was seldom full-hearted. Touring a production of *Faust* was one of the ways in which the Centennial was celebrated, despite the onset of war, in 1940. But while the national orchestra project was revived in 1947, no opera company was set up, though the last major JCW tour aroused great enthusiasm in 1949. Theatre, ballet and opera companies were, however, created in the 1950s.

All toured. Only the ballet company now survives, and it still tours. The New Zealand Opera Company, the creation of Donald Munro, rose to its pinnacle, Simpson suggests, with its 1965 *Porgy and Bess*. Uncertain funding, the problem of orchestral support, transport costs, the advent of TV, sheer bad luck, all made it difficult to advance, and the company went down with a rather impressive *Aida*.

Attempts to revive a national company, in which the present reviewer had some part, were, Simpson thinks, mistaken. The future pointed to regional opera, and three professional companies developed in the 1980s and 1990s, in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. The companies each offer two or three operas a year, largely drawn from a repertoire even more limited than that of opera companies in the rest of the world. They are administrative cadres, not well placed to build up expertise or audience.

Adrienne Simpson's book is well-written, only occasionally taking on something too much of the tone of a broadcast talk, and it contains few errors. She makes a real attempt to recapture the authenticity of the operatic experience, the most difficult task facing the historian of this as of other performing arts. Going, say, to a present-day performance by the City of Birmingham Touring Opera may offer a closer analogy to going to a Musgrove performance than going to Covent Garden or the Aotea Centre: the orchestra reduced, the production simple, the chorus small. But opera survives that, even in ears attuned to the three tenors or eyes accustomed to Metropolitan videos.

The author's main focus is on the fortunes of companies and singers, but she displays a sound grasp of the larger factors, economic, social and cultural, that affected their fortunes. The book will be read by lovers of opera. But it also suggests that it is time that historians of New Zealand in general took fuller account of the history of its performing arts, which, though not easy to handle, ought to be integrated rather than marginalized.

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The Immigrants: The Great Migration from Britain to New Zealand, 1830-1890. By Tony Simpson. Godwit, Auckland, 1997. 240 pp. NZ price: \$34.95. ISBN 0-908877-94-3.

TONY SIMPSON'S ACCOUNT of British migration to nineteenth-century New Zealand offers broad conclusions about the impact and consequences of that process on this country's subsequent development. In his view, the migrant saga was a distinctly plebeian affair that largely comprised ordinary workers seeking better lives elsewhere. For these people, the decision to leave constituted an act of resistance to profound changes wrought by the evolution of industrialization and commercialized agriculture. Hence emigration was not simply a collective response to pressures generated by market forces, but a strategic site for the development of working-class consciousness. In New Zealand, he argues, immigrant workers endeavoured to recover and recreate aspects of an intensely